

A Note on Marginalisation as an Alternative Approach in the Study of Poverty of the Orang Asli Communities in Peninsular Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Poverty among the Orang Asli is still a serious problem. The 1999 Poverty Rate puts the rate for this group at 50.9 % and the hardcore poverty rate at 15.4 %. Research done before this relates poverty to the attitude and the cultural problems of these people. This group of people was said to be lazy, lack discipline, having no enthusiasm to progress and being complacent with their life. Further more, they were also found to be exploited by middlemen. These two approaches to explain poverty of the Orang Asli, are however, no longer suitable. Firstly, if we still insist to blame attitude for the poverty of the Orang Asli, the government would be less enthusiastic in their efforts to develop these people. Next, the exploitative activities of the middlemen have greatly been stifled by the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli. This paper intends to reveal the existence of other factors which would be more significant to explain poverty among these indigenous people. The factor is the marginalisation of these people. This refers to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the authorities in helping the Orang Asli. This happens not only economically but also in the other aspects of these indigenous people's life.

Keywords: poverty; marginalisation; Orang Asli; poverty eradication; hardcore poor

INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss marginalisation in general as an alternative approach as opposed to the other approaches done previously to explain the causes

of poverty of the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia. Through this approach eradication of poverty among the Orang Asli by the government will no longer be concentrated on the Orang Asli's attitude, culture or exploitation of middlemen, which, this far have been taken as factors contributing to the existence of poverty among the Orang Asli. However, before this approach is discussed in depth, this paper will highlight a clear background of poverty of these indigenous people. The explanation will enhance the understanding of the Orang Asli's real living conditions.

BACKGROUND OF THE ORANG ASLI

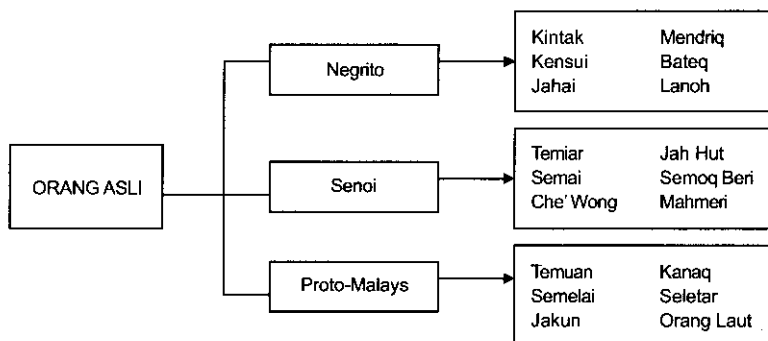
The term "Orang Asli" refers to an ethnic group which is the first inhabitants of Malaysia. This is a Malay term with an English equivalent "aborigines." For the reason that the word aborigines bears a negative undertone of backwardness, undeveloped and primitive, the Malaysian government, since the setting up of the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli in 1954, has institutionalised the term "Orang Asli" to refer to this group of people (Carey 1976). During the colonial English government period, these people were referred to as *Sakai*. *Sakai* is a Malay word which means slave (Kim 1984). This word also means "a group of dirty primitive people who are backward and living in the depth of the jungle" (Shamsul Amri 1978). The term *Sakai* is not well accepted by the Orang Asli because of its negative connotation (Hunt 1951). Other than that, the Orang Asli is also referred to as *Orang Darat* and also *Saudara Lama*.

TRIBES AND ETHNIC GROUPS OF THE ORANG ASLI

The Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia are not a homogenous society. Each tribe has its own language, traditional values, world outlook and history. Anthropologists have categorised the Orang Asli into three principal groups: the Negrito, Senoi and Proto Malays (Hunt 1951). These groups can be subdivided into eighteen smaller ethnic groups (Diagram 1). These groupings were made based on the following details: physical appearance, language, culture, traditional practices and to some extent to their economic roles. On the other hand, ethnologists would group the Orang Asli according to their traditional lifestyles. Negritos are nomadic, while the Senoi and the Proto Malays are farmers (Dentan 1968).

DISTRIBUTION OF THE ORANG ASLI

The Orang Asli are sparsely distributed in all the states of Peninsular Malaysia except Perlis and Penang. The Senoi are found in Perak, Kelantan and Pahang, the Negritos in Kedah, Perak, Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu whereas the Proto Malays are mainly found in the southern states of Pahang, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka (Table 1).



Source: Mohd Fauzi (2006)

DIAGRAM 1. Principal Tribal Groups and Ethnicity of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia

TABLE 1. Distribution of Orang Asli Population by State and Group 2003

States	Negrito	Senoi	Proto-Malays	Total
Pahang	657	22,609	31,027	54,293
Perak	2,131	45,093	363	47,587
Kedah	232	-	-	232
Selangor	-	3,758	10,403	14,161
Kelantan	953	9,701	-	10,654
Terengganu	28	640	-	668
N.Sembilan	-	-	7,624	7,624
Melaka	-	23	1,228	1,251
Johore	-	2	10,940	10,942
Total	4,001	81,826	61,585	147,412

Source: JHEOA (2003)

POVERTY OF THE ORANG ASLI

Poverty of the Orang Asli is observable through their income and quality of life. The 1999 Poverty Rate of Malaysia puts them at 50.9 % and the Hardcore Poor Rate at 15.4 %. These rates are relatively high when compared to the national rate of 7.5 % and 1.4 % respectively (Malaysia 2001). The 1999 Average Monthly Income of the Orang Asli stood at RM666.00 which was substantially lower than that of the other ethnic groups in Malaysia (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Comparison of Average Monthly Income between The Orang Asli and Other Ethnic Groups In Malaysia (1999)

Ethnic Groups	Average Monthly Income (RM)
Orang Asli	666.00
Chinese	3456.00
Indians	2702.00
Bumiputera	1984.00
Others	1371.00
Malaysians	2472.00

Source: Malaysia Statistics Department (1999)

Poverty in terms of quality of life, on the other hand, can be gauged by the Orang Asli's education, basic utilities and housing. On the whole, the level of education of the Orang Asli is still very low. The 1998 National Literacy Rate puts them at 49.2 %. Only 38.3 % of the Orang Asli completed primary school, 10.9 % completed secondary school and 0.06 % owns a university degree (Table 3). However, this situation is comparatively better than that of the previous years. In 1993, for example, the literacy rate was 55.9 % (the Prime Minister's Office 1993). This shows that the educational

TABLE 3. Educational Status of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia 1998

Categories	Total	Percentage
Population	71,359	100.00
Illiterate	35,057	49.20
Primary Education	27,488	38.30
Secondary Education	7,763	10.90
Higher Education	874	1.20
Diploma	134	0.19

Source: JHEOA (2000)

level of the Orang Asli has improved slightly. However, this still remains unsatisfactory.

Gauging the basic utilities, 50.3 % of the Orang Asli's houses have no electricity supply. This is unacceptable since only 33.8 % of the houses with electricity supply have a 24 hour supply, with the remaining being served with a 12 hour generator run service (Table 5).

TABLE 4. Distribution of Orang Asli Household Heads Based on Electricity Supply 1999

Electricity Sources	Total of Household Heads	%
No Electricity Supply	11,638	51.8
24 Hour Supply	7,829	34.9
12 Hour Supply	681	3.0
Generator	892	4.0
Solar	449	2.0
Others	965	4.3
Total	22,454	100.00

Source: JHEOA (2000)

TABLE 5. Distribution of Orang Asli Household Heads Based on Water Supply 1999

Water Sources	Total of Household Heads	%
Home Taps	5,782	25.9
Public Taps	667	3.0
Wells	4,562	20.4
Community Supply	6,394	28.6
Rivers	3,908	17.5
Others	1,005	4.5
Total	23,155	100.0

Source: JHEOA (2000)

The percentage of Orang Asli having own houses is high at 74.5 %. 1.6 % of them live in rented houses and 7.8 % stay with others. However, one problem that the Orang Asli faces is that most of the houses they own are not built on their own land. Only 1.7 % would have houses on their own land. The rest would build their houses either on Orang Asli reserved land, Malay reserved land or on land owned privately or by government agencies (Table 6). The housing problem of the Orang Asli has become more adverse with most of the houses they live in have become deplorable

TABLE 6. Distribution of Orang Asli Household Heads Based on House Ownership 1998

Types of Ownership	Total of Household Heads	%
House on Own Land	330	1.7
Own House on Privately Owned Land	186	0.9
Own House on Orang Asli Reserved Land	9,768	49.6
Own House on Malay Reserved Land	1,376	7.0
Own House on Land Owned by Government Agencies	3,006	15.3
Rented House	310	1.6
Staying with Others	1,546	7.8
Others	3,187	16.2
Total	19,709	100.0

Source: JHEOA (2000)

and unsafe to live in. 34.7 % of these houses need rebuilding and 10.5 % need restoration (JHEOA 2000).

The above discussion concludes that the Orang Asli of Malaysia not only face adverse poverty in terms of income but also standard of living.

APPROACHES IN RESEARCH ON POVERTY OF THE ORANG ASLI

Of late, the literature on poverty of the Orang Asli would emphasize only on the group's attitude and culture and the exploitation of middlemen. Among the writers who take on these approaches are Hassan Ishak (1998), Hassan Mat Nor (1986) and the University of Malaya Consultation Unit (2000). Accordingly, to them poverty of the Orang Asli was caused by these people's laziness, lack of discipline, having no fortitude to progress, and being complacent with their life even though their living conditions are appalling. Furthermore, poverty is also blamed on the Orang Asli's negative perception on education (Lim 1997 and Hassan Mat Nor 1997). There is also writing which relates poverty of the Orang Asli to alcoholism (Lim 1997).

Baharon Azhar Rafei (1967) stresses on the fact that exploitation of middlemen is one of the factors that have contributed to this poverty. The middlemen's monopoly of the Orang Asli's products has led to these people not being able to sell the products to other buyers at a better price. Hood Salleh (1980) and Hunt (1989) incorporate the same approach in their

writings. In addition, both writers also blame poverty on the Orang Asli's land ownership status. This position has failed to provide the Orang Asli with private ownership of land; another factor which has led to the Orang Asli's backwardness and poverty. The present writer, on the other hand, would like to emphasize that the approach which blames attitude and culture of the Orang Asli as factors leading to their poverty is no longer applicable nowadays. This pessimistic approach will inevitably influence the government to neglect their responsibilities to develop the Orang Asli. We should be reminded that, this ploy was once used by the British colonial government towards the Malays. The Malays were labelled as lazy and the British blamed this for their poverty. However, history has proven this to be wrong. The present government's serious and consistent efforts in helping the Malays have resulted in the improvement of the livelihood of the Malays. Similar efforts, then, ought to be carried out to help the Orang Asli.

The approach which specifies that the poverty of the Orang Asli is linked to exploitation should now be considered obsolete. Such exploitation has now been checked. This started when JHEOA began to monitor the Orang Asli's business operations by issuing special licences to selected businessmen. These licences shall be revoked if there is proof that these businessmen exploit the Orang Asli (Endicott 1974). Research undertaken by Endicott (1974) and Dun (1971) reveals that exploitative business dealings have reduced in number to the extent that a symbiotic kind business relationship between the Orang Asli and outsiders (middlemen) has begun to emerge.

If attitude, culture and exploitation are no longer applicable as contributing factors leading to poverty of the Orang Asli, why is poverty still the main problem faced by this community? This proves that we have failed to identify the real causes of poverty of the Orang Asli. The present writer is convinced that the final answer to this disturbing question lies with the government. To give this question an accurate answer, poverty of the Orang Asli must be studied through the marginalisation approach.

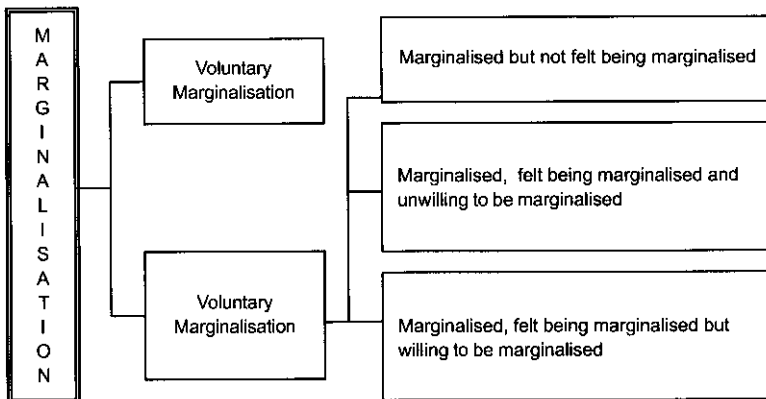
THE MARGINALISATION CONCEPT

Marginalisation is a concept which depicts a condition in which a community receives little attention from the government in the nation building process. The marginalised community (in this case the Orang Asli) receives nominal benefits from the development policy compared to the other communities. Because of this marginalisation process, the Orang

Asli continue to be poor and living in appalling environment. There are efforts on the part of the government to develop this community but these are only nominal, less enthusiastic and at a slower phase. This is in severe contrast to the efforts they put to develop the other major ethnic groups particularly the Malays.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MARGINALISATION

1. There is a marginalised party. The party could be an individual, group or community (Judge 1999; Randolf & Judd 1999; Byrne 1999). In this case the marginalised party is the Orang Asli.
2. The marginalised party is marginalised in the economic, social and political aspects of life (Nayak 1995).
3. All features of marginalisation are inter-related. For example, if one is marginalised in the aspect of education, it is very likely that he will be marginalised in terms of employment He will also be marginalised from the society and be subjected to other forms of marginalisation. Every aspect of marginalisation will enhance the feeling of being marginalised. The is known as “the spiral of disadvantage” (Geddes 2000; Hunter 2000; Levitas 1996)
4. Any form of marginalisation a party experiences is not what the party wants. It is done by factions beyond the control of the marginalised party (Barry 1998). In this case it is the government which has marginalised the Orang Asli.



Source: Mohd Fauzi (2006)

DIAGRAM 2. Classification of Marginalisation

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARGINALISATION AND POVERTY

There has been a lot of research done to relate marginalisation and poverty by foreign researchers. Marginalisation of a community by a another community has resulted in the failure of the members of the community to increase their income and thus they will continue to be poor (for further information please refer to Saavrdra 2002; Jenson 2000; Bradsaw et al. 2002; Beall 2002; Loury 1999; Nayak 1995; Sen 2000). Research in this area by local researchers is still lacking although research by A. Halim Ali (1990) and Mohd Taib Dora (2000) would reveal this relationship. However, this research only focuses on the marginalisation of the urban poor. Research on the marginalisation of the Orang Asli is still non-existence. The common approach used by researches on Orang Asli would nonetheless be on attitude, culture and exploitation on the Orang Asli by middlemen. It is not wrong to incorporate this approach in the research, but it seems that the approach is too narrow to explain the real causes of poverty of the Orang Asli. Thus, for this purpose, a more holistic approach which studies every aspect of poverty of the Orang Asli is needed. And, for this, the present researcher puts forward the marginalisation approach.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF MARGINALISATIONAL APPROACH AND POVERTY OF THE ORANG ASLI

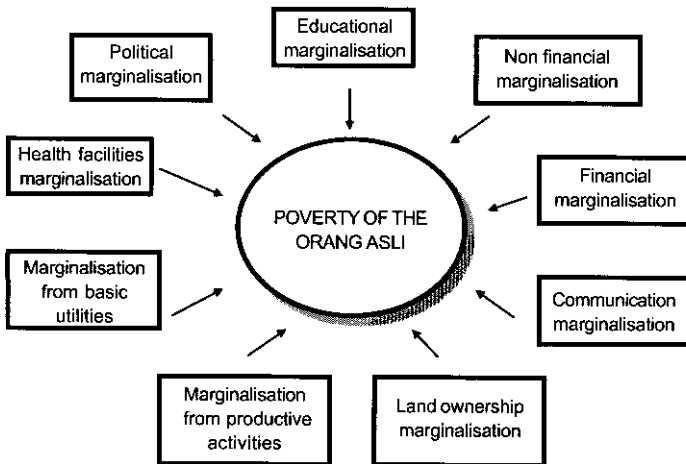


DIAGRAM 3. Conceptual Framework

CONCLUSION

Research on the causes of poverty of the Orang Asli in Malaysia should now move away from the conventional approach (attitude, culture and exploitation of the middlemen) towards a more holistic and realistic one. For this purpose, the marginalisation approach is the best alternative. The suggested approach will study the causes of poverty of the Orang Asli from all aspects of life which include being marginalised economically, socially and politically. With this approach the government would realize that they ought to be more responsible in developing the Orang Asli by making the eradication of poverty among the Orang Asli their main agenda, and should no longer put this as the last item in developing the nation.

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